

Sacramento Economy
Oral History Project

Interview

with

Dr. William Lee

Owner and Publisher,
The Sacramento Observer

History 282C, Oral History
Professor Christopher Castaneda
California State University, Sacramento

Amy Holloway
December 18, 1997

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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

MISSION STATEMENT

A group of graduate students are creating a project to record the memories of persons contributing to Sacramento's diverse economic history. The graduate students are enrolled in History 282C, an oral history seminar, administered by the History Department at California State University, Sacramento. This seminar is part of the required curriculum for the Masters of Arts degree in Public History. The goal of this 1997 fall semester project is to complete 10-15 transcribed oral history interviews. These interviews will represent various aspects of the Sacramento economy.

Once the interviews have been recorded, they will be transcribed and donated to the Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center (SAMCC). Researchers interested in Sacramento's economy will have access to the interview transcriptions at the archives. This seminar/project is being produced under the direction of Dr. Christopher Castaneda, Director of Oral History at California State University, Sacramento.

We welcome your participation in this project. Please feel free to contact Dr. Castaneda by phone (278-5631), or correspondence, if you have any questions about this project.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interviewer/Editor:

Amy Holloway
Graduate Student, CSUS, Department of Public History
Career in librarianship
M.S.L.S. Clark Atlanta University
B.A. Yale University

Interview Time and Place:

November 22, 1997: Office of the Sacramento Observer.
Session of almost one hour and twenty minutes.

Editing:

Holloway checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recording. Editor questions are marked with question marks. Editor insertions are bracketed. Dr. Lee provided his resume.

Tape and Interview Records:

The original recording of the interview is located at the Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center.

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

AH: Saturday, November 22, 1997. We are at the offices of the *Sacramento Observer*. My name is Amy Holloway and I'm doing this interview for Dr. Castaneda's class at Cal State Sacramento. And I am honored to interview Dr. William Lee, the owner and publisher of the Observer Newspapers. Thank you very much Dr. Lee for doing this interview for us.

WL: Very happy to do it. Look forward to your questions and adding what little I can hopefully to this history project.

AH: Well first Dr. Lee I would like to begin by asking you a little about your background. First could you tell me when and where you were born.

WL: I was born in Austin, Texas, May 29, 1936. I was the product of Charles R. Lee, the Reverend Charles R. Lee and Carrie Lee, who were my mom and dad and we were born--I had an older brother who was two years older than I was, James R. Lee, who also resides here in Sacramento by the way.

AH: Okay, and were your parents from Texas also?

WL: They both were from areas of Texas. My dad was from Bastrop (?) Texas and then they moved to Austin and he later--he was in business there for a while and during the War, a few years after I was born they moved to San Francisco. I started

school in Austin, kindergarten and the first and second grades, and then at the second grade, my parents, by that time my dad had moved to San Francisco. The War had started and he got a job with Bethlehem Steel in San Francisco and we moved to the Hunter's Point area of that city at that time. That was about 1941. And I went to Ridgpoint One Elementary School there for a while and then we, later my folks moved to the Fillmore District of San Francisco and he opened a restaurant there, Lee's Barbeque. And I attended, furthered my elementary education by attending the Raphael Weill Elementary School and then later went on to Roosevelt Junior High School out on Geary and Arguello. And I attended the first year of high school at the Washington High School. My brother went to Commerce High School. That is now down towards the Civic Center of the City of San Francisco and I went on to Washington for one year and then my folks finally moved--I think it was about 1949--to Sacramento here. And I attended Grant Union High School here, finished here at Grant Union in 1953.

When we moved to Sacramento, my dad with his variety of talents, he was working for a gentleman who owned a waste removal business, Robinson Waste Removal. This gentleman had, really was in charge of all of the garbage removal and waste removal in the north area, a very wealthy African American businessman and my dad who also had talents of being a mechanic was in charge of all of his trucks and I think the gentleman had from 15-18 trucks that my father was in charge

of. So when we came to Sacramento he was under contract to Mr. Robinson.

AH: So they met in Sacramento or did they know each other when your father was in San Francisco?

WL: My dad, I think, just got wind of this because he used to do a little, while he was in San Francisco, he used to do parttime mechanic work and I think his reputation preceded himself and Mr. Robinson heard of him and asked him to come up and see his operation. I think they had met indirectly through a mutual friend and finally my dad did take him up on coming up to see what his operation was about. And that's when the north area, Arden and if you go out Arden area and Watt area and all of that was literally undeveloped. And the gentleman Mr. Robinson used to own, if you took the corner of Marconi and Watt, he owned all the property east of that corner, northeast of the corner. That was right across the street at the time from Del Paso Country Club so he had a wealth of property. And so my dad--my brother and I used to go out often to visit my dad while we were in high school and we would walk that property and chase rabbits and do things of that sort. As we look at that today, all of that property is well developed and unfortunately it's not in the hands of an African American anymore, but we have seen the day that an African American in fact owned all of that property. It was in the hands of Mr. Robinson.

AH: What was your mother doing during this time?

WL: Mom was essentially a strong housewife and then she was doing, when we moved to Sacramento, she was doing domestic work. And she worked for a family called the McMahons. The McMahons were--Frank McMahon was a small developer of property and real estate and he developed the Fruitridge Shopping Center, that, in partnership with others, but it was for a long time the McMahon Shopping Center there on the corner of Fruitridge and Stockton Boulevard. And my mom worked for that family, doing domestic work for them, and became very good friends of theirs and longtime under their employment and befriended their association in that relationship. So she enjoyed that very much.

AH: So you and your brother were a couple of years apart?

WL: Yes, my brother was two years older than I. He finished Grant Union in 1952, and I finished in 1953, graduated high school. My brother, in fact he went to work during the summer after he graduated at McClellan Air Force Base. He took some classes and courses at the old Grant Tech they called it and continued his employment after the summer at McClellan and he recently retired I think about two or three years ago from his longtime employment with McClellan Air Force Base. He finished there--I think he had achieved a

very high GS rating there so he was pretty high in the government with his seniority and longevity with employment with the government. Now he's an avid retiree and an avid golfer. He loves to golf and so he's enjoying that as well. I went on, after I finished in '53, I had--

AH: Could I ask you a question about your childhood?

WL: Sure.

AH: Like, what kinds of dreams did you have as a child, in terms of, you know, which led you to do what you're doing today?

WL: Well you know my dad, we were a very close family. My dad was a very religious person. He later went into the ministry. He founded a church of his own and he kept us very close to church and church activity, my brother and myself. We used to often, just wanted to be entrepreneurs. I can recall during the summers even while we were at Grant before he graduated, he was driving and he and I used to get a truck and go into the association with my dad being there and working with this salvage company, waste removal company, Mr. Robinson--we used to get us a truck and go through north Sacramento, in the alleys and pick up cardboard and go and sell the cardboard for money. My brother and I we used to make a few dollars doing that. But even predating that I can recall in San Francisco as a youngster too, how we had--our

lives were built around certainly while we were in Hunter's Point, the recreation center. And we used to go there and be active in activities around the recreation center and the thing that I remember about that is that you always were motivated to want to be, to have your own money and I was very strong(ly) interested in being things like a paperboy. I can recall being a delivery boy, a home delivery boy for the San Francisco News, which as a paper at that time was the afternoon newspaper. There was the Examiner News and then the Chronicle was the morning paper. And we used to enjoy delivering that and I'd make 40 cents or something like that, a day and it was just an enormous elation when we were, I was doing that. We were motivated by individuals around those rec centers to want to do that. The Booker T. Washington Center in Hunter's Point, I mean in Fillmore, used to be similarly the kind of recreation site that we used to center our activity on. So those sort of centers, community based centers were very important to our motivation and our desire to wanting to be something and to achieve something as I recall vividly. There were people like Mr. Stratton as I recall at the Booker T. Washington Center in Fillmore, a role-model for people like myself, youngsters like myself at that time. So you can remember these people because they too were very stimulating and motivating to you to want to move forward. And my dad likewise. He was a person that always encouraged us to stand on our own feet, to be very strong and determined and he found, often found scripture to justify

that kind of motivation for us to constantly be close to God and to keep our motivations and our service to people motivated in that way. The schooling that I received, very honestly, was very helpful. I'll be honest with you, I was always very motivated to be a good student. I was a straight A student in high school and it's something you always are proud of, and at Grant Union I was very proud of the fact that I graduated as one of the highest students who graduated. And in that day at Grant Union, as an example, there were only two African Americans that graduated in our class. So we were always motivated to do our studies and to do those things that we felt would help us to achieve later in life.

AH: What was the name of your father's church?

WL: He founded a church called Unity Fellowship Baptist Church in Del Paso Heights. It's currently--it's evolved--it's currently being pastored by the Reverend Murcheson here in Sacramento. Reverend Murcheson credits my dad for his call to the ministry as well, so he's been very loyal and faithful in giving my dad credit for the legacy he left in the religious setting (?). My brother nor I never felt called to the ministry but we often said that the things we're doing today even, as an example, running this newspaper, is a form of ministry that we really want to bring credit to the fact

that we are making our life's contribution in this fashion as an example.

AH: So in 1953 when you graduated, how did you continue your path, your educational path?

WL: You know it's interesting, when I graduated I had several scholarships, but I was really sort of a very bashful, very humble young man, hadn't been away from home. I graduated when I was sixteen, just sixteen and at that time it felt like it was quite young. So I went down to Cal Berkeley. I had gotten accepted to Berkeley. And I went down to Berkeley and the first week or so, I got awful homesick. I kept writing and calling my folks and telling them, "Hey look I don't know if I'm ready for all this," because truly I was introduced to the outside world at that point. Having parents who shelter you very strongly, you felt as if you had now to stand on your own feet. And when you're introduced to the world as a new experience it was somewhat of a culture shock and truly Berkeley was cause as you know Berkeley was the mecca of so many activities. The beatniks were there and the gay movement was just getting started and all of these things were at Berkeley. They were pledging--they were rushing you for pledging you to fraternities. So after a few weeks of that, I told the folks, I said, I want to come home. I'm just too--this is too much. So I asked them if I could. They said, well I don't know if you can get into college here

at Sac State, because school truly had started. But because my grades were so good Sac State accepted me very readily, so they were glad to get me back and I was sort of glad to come home. So after two weeks I came and I started at the campus at Sac State and very frankly it was the first year that they were located on the site where they currently have its campus. So in 1953 I attended two years there, starting in '53, '54, '55, and then I transferred back to Berkeley, and I felt I'd matured a great deal more after that period of time. But it was rather exciting even at State because of again it was that maturation that I felt I had to go through. The classes were challenging and I decided to major in Business with a minor in Mathematics. So I pursued a major in Business and as I said in '55 transferred back to Berkeley. Went on back down there at that time and I felt I was ready for the fraternities and all the other experiences that a university of the size of a four-year campus like Berkeley offers and there were many exciting challenges that it had. And I specialized in my major in the School of Business in Accounting and finished with a degree in Accounting at Berkeley in 1957. It's interesting, I did quite well in school there in terms of academic pursuits. I wasn't as active in a lot of the activities. I played basketball in high school, as an example, at Grant Union, which was a great experience in trying to learn and understand other people, teamwork and all those experiences it brought to bear. Pretty good basketball player but I never did pursue it in

college. There was one or two reasons why. When I went out at Sac State, as an example, after coming back up here, I didn't feel very welcome to be on the team. The coach did not necessarily, I felt, treat us all that kindly so I just said, well that's not for me, and I didn't pursue it You know when we encountered, it's interesting in those days you look back on them, there were many times we encountered the kind of prejudice and racism that is more prevalent now and has been brought to the surface and aired and this type of thing, but I'm sure many even today, it's subtle, it's there--certainly we experienced it in those days as I look back on many of these incidences of trying to find out how to get a better footing in my education or whatever, whether I was pursuing sports or whatever it might have been. It truly was an unequal ground of participation and all, but I didn't realize it at the time--I just shoved it away and went on. The most graphic recognition I have is that when I had graduated from University of California at Berkeley I had decided to stay there in the Bay Area, and so a couple of buddies, a couple of white buddies and myself had gone over to pursue jobs at this accounting firm. Again, my major was Accounting and we had gotten our degrees. So when I went over there--it was during the summer--when I went over there the three of us had gone in and applied for jobs and when I'd gone in and gotten ready with my oral interview, the gentleman told me categorically that he didn't think his firm, the accounting firm, was ready to hire blacks

I tried to encourage him in any way I could, letting him know that I was very qualified and I felt as if I'd fit in readily. I was one of those types of people that didn't make a lot of waves. I did everything I could to try to get that job as I recall but he was not leaning towards the fact of bringing me on. So I went on back to the car--when my buddies got back to the car, I was already there, and they said well I guess we all got those jobs because they had been hired. The two of them had been hired. And it's so interesting because I was the better--I had done better in school than they had. In fact when we were studying together, I always was the guy who'd get the better grades in Cost Accounting and all those different specialties of accounting that we'd go through. And they got so discouraged they wanted to go back in and resign their jobs. They did not do that. I encouraged them not to do that. But I was disillusioned. That was really my first graphic experience with discrimination of the nature where it impacted me in my life. I was somewhat depressed for a while. I asked my folks if I could on home. I came back to Sacramento. I had resolved at that time that I was going to go into the military, so that was my intent. Then I had another friend that called me who was working at Aerojet and he said hey look they're hiring at Aerojet. You would fit right in. You had a minor in Math and you I know they'd be happy to get a guy like you from Berkeley. So, I said well look I don't want to go through that experience now. So he said, there's

this gentleman, a gentleman by the name of Dr. Ralph Plank who was later the person I interviewed with and who hired me for his department at Aerojet, later became a good friend of mine because even we worked together--I worked with him five years. He gave me a lot of responsibility. I became a statistician there and enjoyed the experience, I must say.

AH: What city was that in?

WL: That's right here. Aerojet was the rocket propulsion company right here in Sacramento. It swelled during the aerospace industry boom to about 20,000 people here in Sacramento and had a number of people working for them. I evolved to the point where I became administrative assistant for what they call the--I'm trying to recall whether it was a testing department where we were testing the rocket propulsion for stress and other things and I became administrative assistant for that section during my tenure while I stayed there. I had several people under me at that time.

AH: So how long did you stay there?

WL: Stayed at Aerojet for five years. During that time I started some activity--I stayed from '57-'62--I started parttime real estate activity during the time and later got my broker's license and opened my real estate operation in 1962 formally. And started my own firm in real estate . . .

AH: What was it called?

WL: Lee's Realty. Rather exciting time. I used to teasingly tell people--I had, the company grew quite large, I had twenty odd salespeople working for me and a couple of brokers as well. We had billboards all over the city and was doing quite well, very frankly, in real estate. We were fortunate enough to catch the wave of base closings in the South and many of the people were relocating to McClellan and during that time we made a lot of sales, lot of home sales obviously in the new wave of people as they moved to our city, to Sacramento here. Found that rather exciting. It was during this period that I was very active in civic activity, a number of activities with Junior Chamber of Commerce and active in several of the other civic groups, my church groups and so forth and so on, Macedonia Baptist Church where I was--my folks had brought us through in all this time. And I started the *Observer* along with some other gentleman in 1962, that same year.

AH: Now was there, I read in an article that there was another newspaper before that, the *Outlook*, or something?

WL: Yes, *The Sacramento Outlook*, the Reverend J. T. Muse. He was our forerunner and it's interesting. Six of us bought *The Sacramento Outlook*. At that time we had an organization

called the Men's Civic League in Sacramento, and I was the President of the Men's Civic League, during its charter year, during its founding year. And six of us decided that we needed a communications vehicle to reach and serve the African Americans. Picture if you will a city at that time with less than 20,000 African Americans with very little voice. It was very little continuity of the community. We had some of our civil rights groups were still here. Actually the only one--I shouldn't say some--the only one here was the NAACP. But we really didn't have a kind of a community that was sharing information, few churches and so forth, both in the north area essentially around Del Paso Heights and some in the city, downtown. So the Men's Civic League came to surface and it was essentially a group of individuals, primarily all men, that were professionals from all walks of life, attorneys, we had people from Aerojet, that worked in the city and the county. So, these individuals all came together and that group grew to about 70 to 70 or 80 men--

AH: Is it still going?

WL: No no, it's no longer going, and, during that time, we said, first we needed a communications vehicle, so we founded--six of us said, well let's throw in a few dollars and go and get a voice here. Well, we discovered that Reverend Muse had his paper, *The Sacramento Outlook*, and we approached him about

buying *The Sacramento Outlook*. And he was a very nice gentleman--he published that newspaper, which, at that time, he was very frankly, a Pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, one of the older churches here for a while. He later had Trinity Baptist, so Reverend Muse was a very active minister. But he published the paper only when he got enough ads and he did it with only religious news, so his content and the frequency were kind of irregular. When we bought it we discovered that six people couldn't run a newspaper and the very first edition that we put out--it's interesting--we sent it to his group of readers that he had and we literally got that many complaints, with those readers asking us, what are you guys doing with all this sports news in our religious newspaper. So we finally decided that we wanted to change the format and not offend anybody. And so three out of that six, started *The Sacramento Observer*. It was just a few weeks--it was in November of '62 when that started. There were John Cole, who was an entrepreneur himself; Gene O. (?) Gladden--Gene Gladden was the first disc jockey, licensed disc jockey in the Sacramento area and that was really a milestone to be a disc jockey on the air, to have a license to be a disc jockey at that time in Sacramento; and then myself. So the three of us founded the *Observer*, gave it its name, and I became its first editor. And then Gene O. unfortunately died quite early a few years later and then John Cole eventually sold me his interest in 1965, about three years after the paper had been started. But I was not running the paper fulltime. I

had managers and others that were running it. We had individuals--it seems like everytime we got a talented manager, the daily newspaper would offer them a job or somebody would offer them a job and they would go sputtering away. So we were not that fortunate to keep a manager for a long period of time. So it really, it got started with those other individuals as well as myself with very meager beginnings, essentially to be a civic project to serve essentially, to provide some news for our community. And it started from the seed of the Men's Civic League.

AH: Did it start out as a weekly?

WL: No, we started every other week, and we kept that frequency until 1968. It's interesting, I must--the progress that was made during its earlier stage was essentially built around the activities of the Men's Civic League. As an example, public accomodations was just coming into becoming the law. We tested those laws and things of that sort. We aired the stories about public accomodations and I can recall that the Men's Civic League--many of those men who were committed to civic activities--we went, as an example, up to Reno and tested opening the casinos there and how public they were and in fact from Sacramento--it was those Sacramento based leaders that had gone up, including myself, and opened up those casinos in a public way. And they received us with that understanding. We had plenty press with us. I recall

when we got on the buses and went up there to test those and we opened up the casinos for the first time to receive African Americans for the whole state of Nevada. And so, it was the Men's Civic League that should historically take the credit and the recognition for doing that. They pioneered, risked whatever they had to risk to make sure that that law was enforced, as an example, in the casinos. Now that was just a test case. We felt the hotels here, somewhat similarly, their doors were opened up, and--

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

AH: The Men's Civic League and--

WL: Yes, well you know that group literally can take the credit for opening the door locally, for leadership training and development of its leaders. As an example, from that group came Marion Woods, who was the Head of our--the first Head of our Poverty Program in the '60s. He headed that program. Namon (?) Brown followed him. He likewise was a participant and treasurer of that organization. There were many others who came out of that group, who, literally, that was the only place and grounds we had for what we call leadership development and training, the training of our own leaders

came from our own organization. The Men's Civic League pioneered those efforts in the '60s.

When the *Observer* got going, the *Observer* became the focal point for a lot of the activities. We're the ones that kept the image and the celebration, as an example at that time, of Negro History Week, before the public. We're the ones that initiated and had all the earlier meetings to found, as an example, the Urban League in Sacramento, the Sacramento Urban League. I chaired those meetings myself and got up Henry Talbert who was the Regional Director of the Urban League to here in Sacramento. Put together the first integrated group of leaders to make sure that that League came into being and it in fact did, and it's flourishing today. We started the Sacramento Area Black Caucus which still is an organization that functions here in Sacramento. It was all from the *Observer* and all from our leadership and our participation in those days--

AH: Black Caucus of what?

WL: Sacramento Area Black Caucus

AH: Okay, and what does that focus on?

WL: Essentially that group was founded to serve as a caucus, a coalition of all of our groups, at the time it was founded. It was founded right in our offices. It continues today to

do service in terms of educational project and things of that sort. But it still is very active in our community, as an example today. Again looking back on those organizations started in our area, as an example, in our own office, in *The Sacramento Observer's* office. So historically the *Observer's* been kind of on the forefront of many of the activities that started. I can recall when we got our first African American judge, as an example, in the city, the effort that the *Observer* made there and the support we had to render there and in fact even the opinion, if you will, in making sure that--at that time, Governor Reagan was the governor who appointed the first African American judge, Thomas Doherty, who was an attorney. And so, the *Observer's* been active in the forefront and has seen many others come into being in that nature. We're very active in the employment, opening the doors we felt of employment in the State Capitol, bringing a number of African Americans to many and at that time the elected officials as they were moving in--Doug Farrell, Willie Brown, Myrv Dymally--those leaders did not have their staffs unless they literally came through the offices of the *Observer* to help them find qualified people to serve in those capacities, that they were looking for staff and so forth. So, you know I could go on and on about a number of the--the nature of the impact of this newspaper and in those earlier days how it had affected this community. I personally came over to manage and run the newspaper in 1968

from my real estate operation. As I said we had a number of managers earlier. When I came over in 1968--

AH: Did you continue your real estate operation still at that point?

WL: I put my real estate broker's license on ice. I kept it going for a year and then I put it on ice and later even sold my business to one of the associates that I had at the time. But when I came over in '68, I came over only with the intent of being there one year. We had lost the year before \$62,000, as I recall, running the newspaper. And I kept saying to myself, I can't believe you can't run a newspaper and make money. It just seems like you should be able to at least break even. But when I came over in '68, my wife and I did some national--we were able to go to our national convention. We fell in love with this business. We got to meet fascinating people, Jackie Robinson, Cab Calloway, at a convention--

AH: What was that convention?

WL: It was the National Newspaper Publisher's Association's Convention. It happened to have, that year, to have been held in New York City. And we went for the first time and visited and saw the activities of that Association. The Association essentially is affectionately called the Black

Press of America because it has all of the member newspapers, principal papers, African American papers in the country that are members of that Association. But, when we attended the convention, as I said we met some fascinating people and just literally said gee whiz, isn't this great to be able to meet all of these national people we read about and we know about and we publish about. So we returned home with very ambitious, stars in our eyes, and said to ourselves we're going to make this Observer a good product as well. Because everybody we talked to there said, "Sacramento, where is that?" They didn't even know where our city was. It's interesting when you go back East and you talk to people about it. Very frankly, in five years later, in 1973--

AH: Can I actually ask you, when did you meet your wife?

WL: Kathy and I met here in Sacramento--

KL: Hi, Dr. Lee--

[Tape paused for a moment as Mrs. Lee came in to speak to Dr. Lee]

AH: So I just asked you about Mrs. Lee and--

WL: There she was. Well, you know we met here Sacramento. A mutual friend of ours, Jerry Austin, introduced us. Bless his heart, he's passed away. But we met--I saw her one day

in Weinstock's store--and Jerry and I were shopping, very frankly, I'll be honest with you, I was shopping for another girlfriend I had. Jerry knew her and he introduced me to her and we asked her to help us find a gift for this other young lady that I was at that time getting ready to visit. And she was so nice and gracious to do that and I left there with her face and her niceness in mind, and I kept teasing him about her. I later called her for a date and--

AH: What year was this?

WL: This was in 195-, had to be 1958, it was in 1958. We ended up, to make a long story short, courting each other and then we ended up getting married in 1961. It's interesting how we got married because I mentioned to you I was sort of active in a lot of activities and in 19-, I believe in was in 1961, I was named one of Ebony's most eligible bachelors. And I recall the feature story and it was on--when they got to the feature story, I was on the front page with Wilt Chamberlain at the time. Wilt Chamberlain and I were on the front of Ebony and I got so many ladies writing me. So my wife nudged me on a little bit and said that, hey look, you're getting all these interested ladies--I suspect that if we're going to keep our relationship, you better do something more. So I proposed to her and she accepted me and we got married in July of 1961. So it's been a marriage that we've been very fortunate to have. We actually had three children. One of

our youngsters died of blood clot. My two other sons are living. Billy is married himself and he lives in Los Angeles with his bride and my youngest son, Larry, works here at the *Observer* newspaper. He recently finished San Jose State, last May, May of 1997, and decided he wanted to work here and he's been working here since that period of time. He was interestingly enough, Larry and Billy both, all of them have been close to the newspaper--but Larry was editor of the San Jose State newspaper, the *Spartan*, and one of the first African American editors of that university paper. It's a very outstanding university newspaper as you may know. It's a daily newspaper on its campus. So, he was editor of that newspaper twice and the reason he was editor twice is because he did such an outstanding job the first time, they invited him to come back in his last senior year to edit it again, so he's been a very fine contribution to that paper.

AH: So, you had spoken about the convention you all went to and then you were taking me to 1973?

WL: Yes, so from the time we first got our eyes set on wanting to stay in this business, I came back and we set our sight in making this an outstanding newspaper. So in '73 the *Observer* was named for the first time the top African American newspaper in America. We're very proud of that and--

AH: Named by who?

WL: Named by the same organization, the National Newspaper Publisher's Association. It's interesting, you're named that based upon a number of criteria, everything from the quality of the newspaper, the editorial content to programs related to activity of service in the community and a variety of other things as well. So it's a real--it's usually judged by journalism deans and professors from selected schools by that Association. So it's a very impartial type of judging to be recognized that way. Now picture if you will in '73 there may have been 200 African American newspapers in the country, some of which have been on the forefront in major cities-- Atlanta, Chicago, all those major cities over the years, Philadelphia and so forth. But out of a little town called Sacramento came the *Observer* and moved them all aside and said hey look we're here to play hardball as well. It's interesting, I said in '73 we were named that. That organization had a national convention two years later has its annual conventions but two years later they had its convention in San Francisco at the St. Francis Hotel. We went down again with the hopes of being recognized at that convention as an example. And as I recall, they're 17 different areas of judging and in 1975, even two years later after our first naming, we went back and we won 14 out of 17 categories in this country in excellence. And we were just floored in front of almost a ballroom full at the St. Francis Hotel. We had never, I've never seen anything like it in all

our lives, that we won so many awards. And we were just elated. So we have since then won the Russworm, the John B. Russworm is a trophy you receive. It's really the Oscar of the industry for that recognition and that designation of being number one.

AH: That's from the same organization?

WL: Still from the National Newspaper Publisher's Association. We've won that a total of seven times. So we were very elated over this, as recent as 1994, as an example. So we're very excited about the recognition that this paper has achieved . . .

AH: You mentioned the convention and the awards in San Francisco and before the interview we spoke a little bit about Dr. Carlton Goodlett. And I was just wondering at that time, how, did the newspapers interact at all, or Sacramento and San Francisco, was there much interaction?

WL: Well, you know there is and Dr. Goodlett was a publisher long before I was. I still look upon him as being my mentor, as getting me into the business, very honestly. And Dr. Carlton Goodlett as you alluded to was the publisher of the *San Francisco Sun Reporter*. We felt, the *Observer* felt that we brought a new package, if you will, of editorial information, a new direction for African American newspapers, and we

decided ourselves to look at San Francisco as an outlet for our own newspaper. So we actually opened an office there ourselves after such a glorifying year of recognition in '75. We opened an office there in that same year. We felt that we were not necessarily competing with, as an example, the *Sun Reporter*, but we really as I used to tell Dr. Goodlett, we were really just serving those that he at that point was not reaching. But we have always had a strong respect for those other areas. Ultimately, the *Observer*, we opened up offices in Reno. We opened up an office in Los Angeles. We opened up an office in Stockton. We opened up an office in Vallejo. We had at least seven other outlets for our newspaper, for the *Observer* newspaper. Again, realizing, if you will, that we felt we were kind of the new wave at that time of serving African Americans, and very well respected and very well received in all those cities where we in fact opened offices and created distinct newspapers, not just a distribution point for the Sacramento paper. We created papers within those respective cities. So there was not a lot of competition, if you will, because we felt that we had almost a monopoly on the approach, our very progressive approach to serving African American communities with essentially Black news. The papers that were in the cities when we opened like the *Sun Reporter* were doing their thing continuously but we felt we had a different impact and different slant . . .

The Association continues to serve and we created even to enhance the service of the service of the National

Association--and I became very active with the national group and Dr. Goodlett was the President of the national group for a while and I was also active in its leadership as well--we formed the west coast association called the West Coast Black Publisher's Association in 1971. That group was founded even that far back, again to bring regional attention to the activities here on the west coast of our African American newspapers. We always have worked together in some sense, but when it comes to realizing that these enterprises are in fact businesses, you really compete for the news, you compete for the advertising dollars, for wherever way you can. And it's very challenging to do that. We always wanted to live up to the challenge that it presented us in all these areas.

AH: So have the other outlets continued?

WL: We later pulled back on all of those operations very honestly as we--as an example, and a variety of different reasons. In Reno we sold the newspaper there. There was another publisher or individual, a minister there, frankly, who came on the scene and he worked for us for a while. He wanted to continue the paper their in Reno, so we sold the paper there to him. In the L. A. office, we centered that activity around entertainment news. We called the publication *The Happenings* and it had a statewide distribution, but we centered it around entertainment news and when advertising in the record industry and the entertainment industry got very

difficult to get, we pulled it back as well. So, a lot of these publications we either pulled back or sold them out in some instances as times became more challenging for us in terms of trying to generate advertising dollars. You know a newspaper functions primarily on--the lifeblood of a newspaper is its advertising. If you're having difficulty getting advertising, you will not make it. You've got to have advertising ultimately in order to survive over a long period of time.

AH: What has been your main strategy for attracting those dollars and your marketing plans?

WL: Well, our, we feel--one of the things we've done where we cannot get what we felt ongoing advertising and that would be considered Grade A advertising and the reasons for that, the reasons why we cannot get it many times and this is true with other African American newspapers, is because of a lack of respect and difficulty that people have in understanding the African American market. We felt that one of the vehicles we created to help get some of those dollars were doing special editions and the *Observer* in a small marketplace like Sacramento, as an example, where we lived through the times I mentioned earlier where there were less than 20,000 African Americans and you're dealing with cities with hundreds of thousands of people, we had to develop some kind of a way to attract advertising dollars. Specials were our way of doing

it. We published for fifteen years, as an example, a Special we called "The School and Career Guide." That publication, interestingly enough, got as large as 300 pages full of advertising. And it was just a way of catching the dollar, to get advertising dollars in here, as well as obviously trying to provide employment and school information and opportunities for our readers. A very quality publication, very well received and advertising therefore flowed through it. We enhanced that program of Special Editions around a lot of other Specials that we later developed--Travel Specials, Black History Specials, anything to attract special dollars to our coffers. And it worked very well. It really was an outstanding way to show that the *Observer* had a quality publication and it allowed us to attract dollars. We still do a lot of those even today. But, thank God also this marketplace is growing. The Sacramento marketplace now is about 130,000 African Americans here. So, we now feel what we've got to do is frankly package our promotional marketing message in a more aggressive fashion as we go after the mainstream dollars of advertising. We've been very successful in doing that, comparatively, I'll be honest with you. So we have a number of national accounts that run with us just like they do with mainstream newspapers--Sears and WalMart and some of those kinds of ongoing advertisers that have a need for reaching people. This paper now provides a vehicle for them to do that.

AH: How 'bout the subscription levels in the community and, like kind of the tradition of the paperboys and all that?

WL: Well you know that's evolved because of the--you now look at, you've gone from the newspaper boys to essentially adults delivering the paper as much as you can and this type of thing. I sort of miss that but many of the--just about everyone has done that. You now call them news carriers as opposed to news boys, like we used to. In terms of the enhancement of our distribution, we do whatever we can in order to enhance that. Frankly, right now, the *Observer* has about 50,000 circulation within this marketplace which is a pretty substantial distribution. It makes us the largest weekly, as an example, in Sacramento, in terms of reaching people. There's not always the response in advertising because of that, but that's again a different story but in terms of trying to reach and service the audiences, we do our best to do that. Technology has helped us a great deal. We are now even, frankly, in the threshold as we're talking now of our 35th year of publishing and our desire within the next year is to even move more in a high-tech area with our distribution. We're working on programs to do just that. We're also looking at frankly, merging with a paper in the Bay Area, the *Post* Newspapers. If we can make that happen, it will also give us a broader, a larger marketplace, frankly become almost the, with the merged effort of the *Post* and ourselves, become the entity to serve Northern California

African Americans through the print media. So, we're excited about what this future gives us as we, as I said, now look at our 35th year.

AH: When you mentioned technology, I was reading Clarence Caesar's thesis from Sac State, which I think he did in 1985 and he talked about how he felt with the computer, the information age and everything, that that could be taken advantage of more at that time. How about the internet, has that been something that the newspaper has gotten involved with?

WL: Well we have a designed web page, a home page which we now have just in a very preliminary way introduced it to our internet access people. It has not generated any kind of revenue yet. We sense that it will though. We think that everyone, not only the *Observer*, however, is really trying to understand it better. There was an intimidation and threat to all print media at one time, thinking that it would probably take the place of much of the advertising revenue certainly from classifieds and other areas. But now we see it as kind of an ally. I think that we lived through that when television emerged as well and it never happened. So I think that that'll be the case with this as well. We think it can be a great benefit to us as people begin to want to access information that is specially yours. If you can continue to have the specialized messages, the messages that

talk about African Americans in this capital city of the largest state in the nation, therefore a nation-state you can can therefore be very powerful in terms of the kind of information that people from all over the world would want to know about. They would want to know about people like Dr. Wilson Riles who is based here, and the service of a person like Willie Brown and others that we would feel are very prominent in terms of political arena, the educational arena, the state government arena. We can provide a specialized kind of news that all over the world people will be interested in. So the internet can be in the future I think a great access (asset?) and an ally to us as we take advantage of it. We do have to do that, though--we have to kind of forge the customized, creative way to approach that and do it in a way that provides--our unique way of providing news to all those who are interested in it.

AH: You mentioned the special stories that you can tell, and also in Caesar's thesis he mentioned the 1973 I think Oral History Series that you ran. Is that an ongoing project?

WL: Well you know we did that oral history group in 1973 and that was so well received and that won us a number of national awards all over. We were approached in '76 during the Bicentennial to do something of that nature again and we have not done that yet. But, yes we are--that's on the drawing board to do in 1998, next year as we talk here now. And

we're excited about the possibility of doing that-- approximately fifty people, we're planning to do all senior types, individuals who've made somewhat of a contribution here. Our selection process is now being looked at and we ultimately will do another series of what we're calling "A Long Look Back, No. 2."

AH: You're also a published author, right? You've published the book *Success Secrets of Sacramento Business Professionals*?

WL: Yes, we're looking for this publishing area in its sense not only the newspaper. We're looking for all kinds of venues that will allow us to bring information to the public as well. It's interesting you mention the print side but we're also looking at videotape. Video because we feel video is an opportunity for us doing some documentaries and other things that we want to do. So, I really am excited about what I sense is a thirst and interest for news and information that our people have. We are also uniquely blessed or plighted with, if you will, a lot of unique concerns and problems and so forth. So our health is different--so there are many issues in terms of the health and the diseases that we uniquely and disproportionately are suffering with. Our educational needs are somewhat more challenging and I think that there are many areas in which, if we can provide the venues, the different ways of providing access to information, that will allow us to do some exciting things as

we gear towards our future and the development of communications, frankly, in the African American community. So, publishing and the broadcasting areas all offer us some exciting opportunities as we look towards the future very honestly.

AH: Okay, could I just ask you a couple more questions?

WL: Sure.

AH: When you received your doctorate in, was that 1976?

WL: Yes.

AH: What was that in?

WL: In Communications Arts.

AH: Okay, and what institution?

WL: Southeastern University.

AH: Okay, so how did you decide, working on the paper, you know so busily at that time, to attend the institution?

WL: Well you know it sort of fit within the career direction that I had decided I was going to continue in and it was just a

natural kind of opportunity for me in order as I at that time saw that I needed more of an educational background to become a strong and a quality publisher so I saw fit at the time to do that and made it happen so we were very excited about that opportunity as well. I since then have had tremendous opportunities. I've done some lectures at some of the universities--

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

WL: I felt that that was kind of an opportunity for me. As I've said, it allowed me to do some professional things. I think ultimately if I finally get off of the operating side of the newspaper, I would like to go back and to do some teaching if the opportunity avails itself--and I don't get too aged here (laughs).

AH: I had also read an article from '88 I guess about the Chapter 11 situation with the newspaper. So, I mean, you seem to be doing fine now (he laughs). So, I mean, in terms of that experience, how do you see the future of the paper?

WL: Well you know it's interesting. I think that was a necessary pause in our growth. As we said (?), we realized we had to pull back many of our operations and it allowed us time

enough to revamp, to reorganize and to move forward with a new direction, direction primarily being to focus on our base here in Sacramento, to enhance it in any way we can as we're trying to do here now and then to step forward in an aggressive fashion. It really has allowed us to take a breather and to do that as we fulfill (?) that setback at the time and we have come through that. So we're very fortunate, indeed blessed that now our focus is on developing this enterprise as well as those things I mentioned earlier, of moving forward perhaps merging with others that might allow us a broader base of our audience and market that we can service and work towards. But that's all--I think part of a chapter that we all feel that prepares us frankly for our future and the growth and the understanding of what we've gotta do in order to make this thing work and work well.

AH: This is a new building correct? And how many staff are there?

WL: We have about 35 people part and fulltime here at the *Observer* here. This building is about a 10,000 square foot building and we moved in here with the intent of pulling most of our operations here. We have a warehouse in another section of the city, really it's in the same section, in the Oak Park area of Sacramento, which allows us to warehouse all--we do a lot of inserts and other things so we need that operation as well. We don't do any printing here. We still

are jobbing our printing out and all, and we still plan to do that--unless we, in this merger with the Bay Area newspaper, they have their printing operation where we might utilize that as our printing source. But essentially all of our advertising, editorial, administrative, distribution efforts come out of this office.

AH: And what year did you move here?

WL: We moved here last year 1996. And we've been here a year, very happy and delighted. We've had a number of v.i.p.'s through the building, and we continue to try to enhance it with some historical things that we'll be doing this year, this next calendar year, '98, as we celebrate our 35th year with a lot of historical art and photographs and other items that we feel will be I hope kind of a place that Sacramentans will be proud to say, certainly African Americans will be proud to say that it's part of our community as well.

AH: Where have your other offices been, just like the addresses?

WL: Oh boy, that's an interesting one. We started--our first office was on 21st and Broadway. It's now a barber shop. We were in that building when we first started the *Observer*, first started back in 1962. At that time our neighbor was the NAAACP Credit Union and it was on the corner of 21st and X Streets. So we were in the same building, proximity of

that. We had a storefront type of office. That's the *Observer's* earlier beginning. We moved to an office on 18th Street, really just a couple blocks away from the 21st Street between K and Broadway as well. Stayed there any number of years as we evolved our paper as well. For a short time we were on 24th and I Streets, a very short time and then we ultimately moved in 1968 when I came over to run the newspaper on a fulltime basis, we moved to 3540 4th Ave. which is where we stayed from '68 frankly until we moved into this building here. Now again we had a couple other offices that were adjunct offices but our main office for that long period of time from '68 till '96 was on the 4th Ave. Street. And so we had our warehouse and distribution office in other sites, some of which when we moved here into this building at 2330 Alhambra, we moved here bringing some of those operations now to this site and we're very excited about this location.

AH: Okay, and let me ask, how do you see the Sacramento economy, in general and were any of those thoughts shared in the *Success Secrets* book?

WL: Well some of it has been but I think our economy is growing. The challenge we have here in Sacramento is to get the African American entrepreneurs moving as rapidly as I see some of the other emerging market areas moving. The Latino businesses are moving much more rapidly than we are. The

Asian community is moving now with its Chamber and other organizations as well supporting them. The African American dimension has not been moving as rapidly as I'd like to see it. Part of the reason for that is frankly there are not enough examples. There are not enough rolemodels like ourselves motivating and stimulating young people to go into business. As you go to the business schools, you don't see many African Americans majoring in Business and we need to do that. We need to encourage young people to this exciting arena of entrepreneurship, of becoming business leaders, if you will, business persons, if you will. We have also seen that the other support mechanisms, the loan opportunities, are not as accessible and available and we need to make that more available to African Americans. But the economy in general is moving very nicely in Sacramento. There's no reason for youngsters not going into business. We think you can start businesses from home-based operations and move rapidly into other--and grow into other dimensions of business as we think we've done. So there is challenging opportunities, just a matter of us taking advantage of it. The other side of that is dimensionally we have a marketplace here now, as I mentioned earlier. You've got a marketplace now of 130,000 African Americans who have needs for services of all different suasions, all different dimensions. You also have as an example about \$2,000,000,000 coming through the hands of African Americans who reside in this marketplace. So there's no reason why some of this money

can't stay within the community. As an example, as we open a variety of different retail operations, whether it's a cleaners or whatever it may be. So I get very excited about what the future lies for us to do but the challenge lies for us to get past our passiveness and move towards an active, proactive type of effort to bring more into entrepreneurship and to get more into business.

AH: Okay, and lastly how do see legislation or things like Proposition 209, the impact those things are having at this time?

WL: Well you know I think it's more symbolic impact. I don't sense that--when you talk about the contracts that African Americans have gotten from university or the state government--African Americans has not been that significant, so were not going to be significantly impacted by the loss of 209. It had symbolic setback purposes and impacts on many of our lives, but I don't think we should rest on that. I think there are other ways for us to move into making sure that enterprises are diverse. I sense that in the general marketplace, there's not gonna be a slack or a cutback with the principal companies. Certainly those who have looked for a reason will find a reason even whether 209 is there or not, so they're not--you don't rest with those people--you move towards those who have made a concerted effort to make things happen, to bring about diverse workplaces, to in fact do

contracts with minority and African American businesses as well. So I think that right now it's more symbolic impact but rest assured we have the energy, the knowledge, the creativity to move forward, to whatever the challenges might be within our communities and that's what we should be about right now. That public policy is something we should lay at rest and move towards public policy that really can better benefit us as we move forward to make some impact on all of our community as well as our own.

AH: Is there anything else that you would like to share about your vision for the future?

WL: Well you know I can only say that we are excited about it. My main concern always is that what happens to many of our enterprises as I described earlier too, about this gentleman who had a wealth of property in the north area and for some reason it was lost. Where is succession? Where are our family jewels that continue to be passed on from generation to generation. So my concern is to make sure what little we've done and I never want to categorize it as being a monumental thing, but it's been very challenging, very encouraging, what little we've done I'd like to make sure someone comes along, hopefully it can be my family or any others who might--would see the opportunities here, would step forward and build on this little jewel to move forward to the day that we, the *Observer*, or enterprises like ours or

newspapers like ours are daily newspapers serving maybe not only our own community but other communities as well.

There's no reason why this cannot happen. The resources are there. The technology is there. Certainly the knowledge is there. So it's really a matter of us energizing ourselves and being motivated and recognizing that we can in fact make it happen.

AH: Thank you so much Dr. Lee. It has really been an honor to be able to hear your story and thank you for sharing it with us.

WL: That's alright Amy. I'm glad to do it. Thank you too for inviting me.

[End Tape 2, Side A]

[End Interview]